

## Welcome to the Fall Creek Abbey 2019 Advent Retreat!

We hope you have a sense of expectation as you enter this quiet sanctuary in time. Have you considered that God has been anticipating your arrival? That Christ is with you, right now, and is genuinely grateful that you want to be with him? Even the Holy Spirit, as near to you as your breath, is dancing with joy because of the opportunity to speak to your heart.

So, before you get started, take a moment to settle in and still your mind, cultivating a posture of openness to the Triune God-who-is-near.

1. Take a few long, deep breaths.
2. Let go of anything that you brought with you today—unfinished work, a crying child, an unresolved conflict, a worry. To do so,
  - Place your hands on your lap, palms open and facing up.
  - Imagine all this unfinished business resting on your hands. Feel the weight of it all.
  - Lift your hands up, offering them to God who sees you.
  - Turn your hands over, releasing them from your grip.
3. Sit for a minute, fully present to yourself and God. Stay there until you are ready to move on.



4. Write down anything you want to remember as you prepare for your retreat.

### ***Looking for the Good News during Advent***

We live in a world that seems to be awash in what can only be described as bad news. For many of us, that's true not just on a global scale; it's an apt description of our personal state of affairs. Yet it's often the bad news in our lives that makes the good news so good and stirs our longing for Christ to come! In this Advent guide, we'd like to invite you to search for the deposits of good news in the familiar Christmas story, even amidst the difficult atmosphere of 1<sup>st</sup> Century Palestine. Here's how.

***Looking for the Hidden Highlights:*** When we were children sitting in the waiting room of a doctor's office, it was typical to find several copies of a children's magazine known as *Highlights*. Inside the magazine was a detailed ink drawing of an interesting scene. And in that scene a number of items were hidden that didn't belong but were disguised in a way to make them blend in: a pair of scissors, a bicycle, a baseball bat. As we waited to get our booster shots or have our sprained ankle checked, we'd lose ourselves looking for as many of these hidden objects as we could find.

This is the approach we'd like to encourage you to take as you engage with these common Advent narratives. As you read them you will recognize many familiar scenes. However, consider them from a new vantage point; look for the presence and impact of good news within the setting of the story, a story riddled with difficulty, humiliation, and oppression.

### ***The Setting for the Advent of Christ: 1<sup>st</sup> Century Palestine***

To help you appreciate what the world was like when Jesus Christ entered the scene of 1<sup>st</sup> Century Palestine, here are a few defining facts:

- The Jewish people of Palestine lived under the domination and oppression of the cruel Roman government. Practically speaking, this made life very difficult. Spiritually speaking, as God's chosen people, this was humiliating oppression.
- 90% of the population were Jewish peasant farmers, while 10% were the ruling elite, mostly government officials. The elite possessed 66% of the wealth, extracted from taxes on produce and land rent from the farmers.
- Jewish society was intrinsically governed by a caste system based on those who were considered pure (wealthy, healthy, male, and Jewish) and those who were considered impure (poor, physically or mentally impaired, female, or gentile).
- Jewish society was deeply patriarchal; women and children were inferior and the property of male heads of home. A widow was the most vulnerable of all, having no provider or protector.
- Barrenness was a social stigma and considered a defect of the woman and a sign of sin. Women who conceived out of wedlock were immoral and outcasts.

As you consider the backdrop to Christ's coming, let's begin by engaging with an elderly couple as they unexpectedly encountered the good news of the Advent of Christ. (The following Scriptures are from *The Voice* transliteration of the Bible.)

**#1 The Good News as Experienced by Zacharias and Elizabeth**  
**Luke 1:5-24**

<sup>5</sup>Zacharias was serving as a priest. He was a member of the priestly division of Abijah (*a grandson of Aaron who innovated temple practices*), and his wife, Elizabeth, was of the priestly lineage of Aaron, *Moses' brother*. <sup>6</sup>They were good and just people in God's sight, walking with integrity in the Lord's ways and laws. <sup>7</sup>Yet they had this sadness. Due to Elizabeth's infertility, they were childless, and at this time, they were both quite old—*well past normal childbearing years*.

<sup>8</sup>One day Zacharias was chosen to perform his priestly duties in God's presence, according to the temple's normal schedule and routine. <sup>9</sup>He had been selected from all the priests by the customary procedure of casting lots to enter the sacred precincts of the temple. There he burned sweet incense, <sup>10</sup>while outside a large crowd of people prayed. <sup>11</sup>*Suddenly Zacharias realized he was not alone*: a messenger of the Lord was there with him. The messenger stood just to the right of the altar of incense. <sup>12</sup>Zacharias was shocked and afraid, <sup>13</sup>but the messenger reassured him.

**Messenger:** Zacharias, calm down! Don't be afraid! Zacharias, your prayers have been heard. Your wife is going to have a son, and you will name him John. <sup>14</sup>He will bring you great joy and happiness—and many will share your joy at John's birth.

<sup>15</sup>This son of yours will be a great man in God's sight. He will not drink alcohol in any form; *instead of alcoholic spirits*, he will be filled with the Holy Spirit from the time he is in his mother's womb. <sup>16</sup>*Here is his mission*: he will turn many of the children of Israel around to follow the path to the Lord their God. <sup>17</sup>Do you remember the prophecy about someone to come in the spirit and power of the prophet Elijah; someone who will turn the hearts of the parents back to their children; someone who will turn the hearts of the disobedient to the mind-set of the just and good? Your son is the one who will fulfill this prophecy: he will be *\*the Lord's forerunner*, the one who will prepare the people and make them ready for God.

**Zacharias:** <sup>18</sup>How can I be sure of what you're telling me? I am an old man, and my wife is far past the normal age for women to bear children. *This is hard to believe!*

**Messenger:** <sup>19</sup>I am Gabriel, the messenger who inhabits God's presence. I was sent here to talk with you and bring you this good news. <sup>20</sup>Because you didn't believe my message, you will not be able to talk—not another word—until you experience the fulfillment of my words.

*\*reference to Christ, the Messiah*

<sup>23</sup>When his time on duty at the temple came to an end, he went back home to his wife. <sup>24</sup>Shortly after his return, Elizabeth became pregnant. She avoided public contact for the next five months.

**Elizabeth:** <sup>25</sup>I have lived with the disgrace of being barren for all these years. Now God has looked on me with favor. When I go out in public *with my baby*, I will not be disgraced any longer.

### ***Meditation and Contemplation***

1. *Where can you identify “bad news” in this couple’s story that provides the setting for the good news?*

2. *How would you name and describe the good news that Zachariah and Elizabeth received?*

3. *If you were Zachariah or Elizabeth, what would it be like to receive this good news? What might the good news awaken, heal, encourage, or strengthen in you?*

**#2 The Good News as Experienced by Mary, the Mother of Jesus**  
**Luke 1:26-38**

<sup>26</sup> Six months later in Nazareth the heavenly messenger Gabriel made another appearance. This time the messenger was sent by God <sup>27</sup> to meet with a virgin named Mary, who was engaged to a man named Joseph, a descendant of King David himself. <sup>28</sup> The messenger entered her home.

**Messenger:** Greetings! You are favored, and the Lord is with you!  
[Among all women on the earth, you have been blessed.]

<sup>29</sup> The heavenly messenger's words baffled Mary, and she wondered what type of greeting this was.

**Messenger:** <sup>30</sup> Mary, don't be afraid. You have found favor with God. <sup>31</sup> Listen, you are going to become pregnant. You will have a son, and you must name Him "Savior," or Jesus. <sup>32</sup> Jesus will become the greatest among men. He will be known as the Son of the Highest God. God will give Him the throne of His ancestor David, <sup>33</sup> and He will reign over the covenant family of Jacob forever.

**Mary:** <sup>34</sup> But I have never been with a man. How can this be possible?

**Messenger:** <sup>35</sup> The Holy Spirit will come upon you. The Most High will overshadow you. That's why this holy child will be known, as

*not just your son, but also as the Son of God.* <sup>36</sup> *It sounds impossible, but listen—you know your relative Elizabeth has been unable to bear children and is now far too old to be a mother. Yet she has become pregnant, as God willed it.* Yes, in three months, she will have a son. <sup>37</sup> So the impossible is possible with God.

**Mary (deciding in her heart):** <sup>38</sup> Here I am, the Lord's humble servant. As you have said, let it be done to me.

And the heavenly messenger was gone.

***Meditation and Contemplation***

1. *Where can you identify "bad news" in Mary's story that provides the setting for the good news?*

2. *How would you name and describe the good news that Mary received?*

3. *If you were Mary, what would it be like to receive this good news? What might the good news awaken, heal, encourage, or strengthen in you?*

***Pause to reflect on Christ's birth:***

Step out of the Advent guide for a moment and open your Bible or the one on the desk to Luke 2: 1-20 (pg. 900) Take time to read the story of Christ's birth. Use your imagination as you picture the scene. Sit in wonder.

**#3 The Good News as Experienced by Simeon and Anna  
Luke 2:21-38**

<sup>21</sup> Eight days after His birth, the baby was circumcised *in keeping with Jewish religious requirements*, and He was named Jesus, the name the messenger had given Him before His conception in Mary's womb. <sup>22</sup> After Mary had observed the ceremonial days of *postpartum* purification required by Mosaic law, she and Joseph brought Jesus to the temple in Jerusalem to present Him to the Lord.

<sup>25</sup> *While fulfilling these sacred obligations at the temple*, they encountered a man in Jerusalem named Simeon. He was a just and pious man, anticipating the liberation of Israel from her troubles. He was a man in touch with the Holy Spirit. <sup>26</sup> The Holy Spirit had revealed to Simeon that he would not die before he had seen the Lord's Anointed One. <sup>27</sup> The Spirit had led him to the temple that day, and there he saw the child Jesus in the arms of His parents, who were fulfilling their sacred obligations. <sup>28</sup> Simeon took Jesus into his arms and blessed God.

<sup>29</sup> **Simeon:** Now, Lord *and King*, You can let me, Your humble servant, die in peace.

<sup>30</sup> You promised me that I would see with my own eyes what I'm seeing now: Your freedom,

<sup>31</sup> Raised up in the presence of all peoples.

<sup>32</sup> He is the light who reveals Your message to the other nations, and He is the shining glory of Your *covenant* people, Israel.

<sup>33</sup> His father and mother were stunned to hear Simeon say these things. <sup>34</sup> Simeon went on to bless them both, and to Mary in particular he gave predictions.

**Simeon:** Listen, this child will make many in Israel rise and fall. He will be a significant person whom many will oppose. <sup>35</sup> *In the end*, He will lay bare the secret thoughts of many hearts. And a sword will pierce even your own soul, Mary.

<sup>36</sup> At that very moment, an elderly woman named Anna stepped forward. Anna was a prophetess. She had been married for seven years *before her husband died* <sup>37</sup> and a widow to her current age of 84 years. She was *deeply devoted to the Lord*, constantly in the temple, fasting and praying. <sup>38</sup> When she approached *Mary, Joseph, and Jesus*, she began speaking out thanks to God, and she continued spreading the word about Jesus to all those who shared her hope for the rescue of Jerusalem.

### ***Meditation and Contemplation***

1. *Where can you identify "bad news" in Simeon and Anna's stories that provide the setting for the good news?*
2. *How would you name and describe the good news that Simeon and Anna received?*
3. *If you were Anna or Simeon, what would it be like to receive this good news? What might the good news awaken, heal, encourage, or strengthen in you?*



## ***Now Consider This....***

In each of these character's lives, they received good news from God in the context of their own challenges, disappointments, and long-suffering. The good news and bad news co-existed. One didn't magically cancel out the other.

This juxtaposition asserts one of the most arduous challenges of our lives—to develop a growing capacity to hold *both* bad news and good news simultaneously. To be honest about and acknowledge the dark and difficult, while concurrently recognizing and receiving the good and beautiful gifts given us by God.

Is it not the difficulty and darkness we encounter in this world that often inspires our determination and innovation, forging character and transforming us into agents of good news? Is it not the challenges we face and the hardships we suffer that grow our capacity to love and persevere in hope that good news will come?

If you were to consider the sorrows and stresses of your life as kindling for your formation, what might that mean for you during this season of Advent? It's time to look at your own life; your own challenges and disappointments as you consider the good news and where the advent of Christ might be breaking in.

*Take some time to name the current challenges, difficulties and places of darkness in your life. Where are you struggling with "bad news"?*

*Where specifically do you need and long to receive good news right now?*

*Are you aware of any evidence that the good news of Christ's presence is breaking in, awakening, healing, encouraging or strengthening you today?*

*How might God be urging you to receive and respond to the good news of Jesus coming into your world, right here, right now?*



## *Before you return....*

Each week at an Anglican church in Indianapolis called The Table, the one who brings the gospel message will declare a clear statement that gives focus to the homily. And each week it begins with the same words, "The good news of Jesus Christ is..." It's as if the hearers of the good news are invited to walk around a priceless diamond to take in a new, unfamiliar facet. Isn't it marvelous how we never run out of new implications, promises and comforts of the infinitely good news of the gospel?

As you prepare to re-enter our world where bad news seems to always be in the foreground, we invite you to capture the good news you've heard today and carry it with you.

To do this, write a simple phrase or statement using the prompt, "The good news of Jesus Christ is..." and fill in the rest of the blank with a statement of promise that is personal to you from your retreat.

Here are a few examples to help you see what it might look like:

- The good news of Jesus Christ is that God sees me, has compassion for me, and will sustain me in my difficulty.
- The good news of Jesus Christ is that every person is important to God, especially those who are most forgotten, most despised and most invisible.
- The good news of Jesus Christ is that God is with us no matter how dark our world, how bankrupt our society and government; God's love will ultimately prevail.

Now, as you gather what you have been reflecting on during your retreat, craft a statement of God's good news for you here:

"The good news of Jesus Christ is

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*Before you go, write your statement on the card provided. If you're so inspired, take time to decorate or doodle on the card. Take it with you and return to it throughout this Advent season, reflecting on the meaning of the good news for you and our world.*